

# PATENT APPLICATION

## A SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR GENERATING AN ANIMATABLE CHARACTER

5

By Inventor:

*Kevin L. Hunter*

10

### CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

15 This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/062,361, filed on October 15, 1997, entitled A SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR GENERATING AN ANIMATABLE CHARACTER by inventor Kevin L. Hunter, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference for all purposes.

20 This application is related to co-pending U.S. Patent Application Serial No's. 08/951,089; 60/062,068; 08/951,087; and 08/951,083 (Attorney Docket No's. ELECP001, ELECP003+, ELECP004, and ELECP008, respectively), all filed October 15, 1997 respectively, are incorporated herein by reference for all purposes.

#### 1. FIELD OF THE INVENTION

25 The present invention relates generally to a method and system for generating graphics in a computer system. More particularly, the present invention relates to generating an animatable object such that a user can generate and animate the object easily and effectively.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

With the explosive growth and popularity of computer games and Internet interaction, the use of images, especially images of objects such as animated characters, are becoming more prominent. Animated characters are commonly used in computer games to represent either the player or other various components of the game. Likewise, there are also numerous potential uses of an animatable character for use with Internet interaction. For example, an animated character could represent a user in a chat room on the Internet to provide more interactivity than conventional chat rooms. Another example is a community "room" where a character, used as a visual representation of a user, can roam and explore various parts of the community "room".

Typically, these objects, such as animatable characters, are laboriously created by a computer programmer through the use of codes which are typically too complex for the average user to utilize. Characters are often crafted by an artist and entered into a computer. Accordingly, these animatable objects and characters are typically predetermined and is normally not easily customized by the user. Additionally, conventional character generation and animation methods typically do not facilitate approximate real-time customized interaction with a predetermined environment or between two customized animatable characters. For instance, using conventional methods, it would be extremely difficult and expensive for each game player to use a customized animatable character in a real-time game. Conventional animation methods typically utilize a series of static images with very minor changes to simulate motion. Using this conventional technique, it would be extremely difficult and costly



## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a system and method for generating an animatable object in a computer system. The generation of the animatable object is simple and effective enough to allow a user to generate a customized object such as an animatable character which resembles the user. Additionally, once the animatable object is generated, information regarding the generation of the object can be sent to another computer, for example, it can be transmitted through a network such as the Internet. Once the object has been generated at the receiving computer, only data regarding the motions of the generated object need be sent to the receiving computer in order to animate the object.

A skeleton of the desired character is constructed by the user utilizing various predetermined components. Alternatively, a generalized pre-constructed skeleton constructed from the predetermined components can be made available for the user. These predetermined components include a various selection of rods and joints. The rods are rigid components which remain rigid during motion, while the various joints are moveable components. A static digitized image, for example, an image of the user, is utilized and the constructed skeleton is superimposed onto it. The desired object, such as the image of the user, can then be extracted from the background of the digital image, superimposed onto the skeleton, and the resulting personal character can then be animated, for instance by selecting and dragging one of the hands with a mouse.

A system and method according to the present invention for generating an animatable object in a computer system comprises the steps of constructing a skeleton

of a predetermined object; and superimposing the skeleton with a digital image,  
wherein the digital image includes the predetermined object.

11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
61  
62  
63  
64  
65  
66  
67  
68  
69  
70  
71  
72  
73  
74  
75  
76  
77  
78  
79  
80  
81  
82  
83  
84  
85  
86  
87  
88  
89  
90  
91  
92  
93  
94  
95  
96  
97  
98  
99  
100  
101  
102  
103  
104  
105  
106  
107  
108  
109  
110  
111  
112  
113  
114  
115  
116  
117  
118  
119  
120  
121  
122  
123  
124  
125  
126  
127  
128  
129  
130  
131  
132  
133  
134  
135  
136  
137  
138  
139  
140  
141  
142  
143  
144  
145  
146  
147  
148  
149  
150  
151  
152  
153  
154  
155  
156  
157  
158  
159  
160  
161  
162  
163  
164  
165  
166  
167  
168  
169  
170  
171  
172  
173  
174  
175  
176  
177  
178  
179  
180  
181  
182  
183  
184  
185  
186  
187  
188  
189  
190  
191  
192  
193  
194  
195  
196  
197  
198  
199  
200  
201  
202  
203  
204  
205  
206  
207  
208  
209  
210  
211  
212  
213  
214  
215  
216  
217  
218  
219  
220  
221  
222  
223  
224  
225  
226  
227  
228  
229  
230  
231  
232  
233  
234  
235  
236  
237  
238  
239  
240  
241  
242  
243  
244  
245  
246  
247  
248  
249  
250  
251  
252  
253  
254  
255  
256  
257  
258  
259  
260  
261  
262  
263  
264  
265  
266  
267  
268  
269  
270  
271  
272  
273  
274  
275  
276  
277  
278  
279  
280  
281  
282  
283  
284  
285  
286  
287  
288  
289  
290  
291  
292  
293  
294  
295  
296  
297  
298  
299  
300  
301  
302  
303  
304  
305  
306  
307  
308  
309  
310  
311  
312  
313  
314  
315  
316  
317  
318  
319  
320  
321  
322  
323  
324  
325  
326  
327  
328  
329  
330  
331  
332  
333  
334  
335  
336  
337  
338  
339  
340  
341  
342  
343  
344  
345  
346  
347  
348  
349  
350  
351  
352  
353  
354  
355  
356  
357  
358  
359  
360  
361  
362  
363  
364  
365  
366  
367  
368  
369  
370  
371  
372  
373  
374  
375  
376  
377  
378  
379  
380  
381  
382  
383  
384  
385  
386  
387  
388  
389  
390  
391  
392  
393  
394  
395  
396  
397  
398  
399  
400  
401  
402  
403  
404  
405  
406  
407  
408  
409  
410  
411  
412  
413  
414  
415  
416  
417  
418  
419  
420  
421  
422  
423  
424  
425  
426  
427  
428  
429  
430  
431  
432  
433  
434  
435  
436  
437  
438  
439  
440  
441  
442  
443  
444  
445  
446  
447  
448  
449  
450  
451  
452  
453  
454  
455  
456  
457  
458  
459  
460  
461  
462  
463  
464  
465  
466  
467  
468  
469  
470  
471  
472  
473  
474  
475  
476  
477  
478  
479  
480  
481  
482  
483  
484  
485  
486  
487  
488  
489  
490  
491  
492  
493  
494  
495  
496  
497  
498  
499  
500  
501  
502  
503  
504  
505  
506  
507  
508  
509  
510  
511  
512  
513  
514  
515  
516  
517  
518  
519  
520  
521  
522  
523  
524  
525  
526  
527  
528  
529  
530  
531  
532  
533  
534  
535  
536  
537  
538  
539  
540  
541  
542  
543  
544  
545  
546  
547  
548  
549  
550  
551  
552  
553  
554  
555  
556  
557  
558  
559  
560  
561  
562  
563  
564  
565  
566  
567  
568  
569  
570  
571  
572  
573  
574  
575  
576  
577  
578  
579  
580  
581  
582  
583  
584  
585  
586  
587  
588  
589  
590  
591  
592  
593  
594  
595  
596  
597  
598  
599  
600  
601  
602  
603  
604  
605  
606  
607  
608  
609  
610  
611  
612  
613  
614  
615  
616  
617  
618  
619  
620  
621  
622  
623  
624  
625  
626  
627  
628  
629  
630  
631  
632  
633  
634  
635  
636  
637  
638  
639  
640  
641  
642  
643  
644  
645  
646  
647  
648  
649  
650  
651  
652  
653  
654  
655  
656  
657  
658  
659  
660  
661  
662  
663  
664  
665  
666  
667  
668  
669  
670  
671  
672  
673  
674  
675  
676  
677  
678  
679  
680  
681  
682  
683  
684  
685  
686  
687  
688  
689  
690  
691  
692  
693  
694  
695  
696  
697  
698  
699  
700  
701  
702  
703  
704  
705  
706  
707  
708  
709  
710  
711  
712  
713  
714  
715  
716  
717  
718  
719  
720  
721  
722  
723  
724  
725  
726  
727  
728  
729  
730  
731  
732  
733  
734  
735  
736  
737  
738  
739  
740  
741  
742  
743  
744  
745  
746  
747  
748  
749  
750  
751  
752  
753  
754  
755  
756  
757  
758  
759  
760  
761  
762  
763  
764  
765  
766  
767  
768  
769  
770  
771  
772  
773  
774  
775  
776  
777  
778  
779  
780  
781  
782  
783  
784  
785  
786  
787  
788  
789  
790  
791  
792  
793  
794  
795  
796  
797  
798  
799  
800  
801  
802  
803  
804  
805  
806  
807  
808  
809  
810  
811  
812  
813  
814  
815  
816  
817  
818  
819  
820  
821  
822  
823  
824  
825  
826  
827  
828  
829  
830  
831  
832  
833  
834  
835  
836  
837  
838  
839  
840  
841  
842  
843  
844  
845  
846  
847  
848  
849  
850  
851  
852  
853  
854  
855  
856  
857  
858  
859  
860  
861  
862  
863  
864  
865  
866  
867  
868  
869  
870  
871  
872  
873  
874  
875  
876  
877  
878  
879  
880  
881  
882  
883  
884  
885  
886  
887  
888  
889  
890  
891  
892  
893  
894  
895  
896  
897  
898  
899  
900  
901  
902  
903  
904  
905  
906  
907  
908  
909  
910  
911  
912  
913  
914  
915  
916  
917  
918  
919  
920  
921  
922  
923  
924  
925  
926  
927  
928  
929  
930  
931  
932  
933  
934  
935  
936  
937  
938  
939  
940  
941  
942  
943  
944  
945  
946  
947  
948  
949  
950  
951  
952  
953  
954  
955  
956  
957  
958  
959  
960  
961  
962  
963  
964  
965  
966  
967  
968  
969  
970  
971  
972  
973  
974  
975  
976  
977  
978  
979  
980  
981  
982  
983  
984  
985  
986  
987  
988  
989  
990  
991  
992  
993  
994  
995  
996  
997  
998  
999  
1000  
1001  
1002  
1003  
1004  
1005  
1006  
1007  
1008  
1009  
1010  
1011  
1012  
1013  
1014  
1015  
1016  
1017  
1018  
1019  
1020  
1021  
1022  
1023  
1024  
1025  
1026  
1027  
1028  
1029  
1030  
1031  
1032  
1033  
1034  
1035  
1036  
1037  
1038  
1039  
1040  
1041  
1042  
1043  
1044  
1045  
1046  
1047  
1048  
1049  
1050  
1051  
1052  
1053  
1054  
1055  
1056  
1057  
1058  
1059  
1060  
1061  
1062  
1063  
1064  
1065  
1066  
1067  
1068  
1069  
1070  
1071  
1072  
1073  
1074  
1075  
1076  
1077  
1078  
1079  
1080  
1081  
1082  
1083  
1084  
1085  
1086  
1087  
1088  
1089  
1090  
1091  
1092  
1093  
1094  
1095  
1096  
1097  
1098  
1099  
1100  
1101  
1102  
1103  
1104  
1105  
1106  
1107  
1108  
1109  
1110  
1111  
1112  
1113  
1114  
1115  
1116  
1117  
1118  
1119  
1120  
1121  
1122  
1123  
1124  
1125  
1126  
1127  
1128  
1129  
1130  
1131  
1132  
1133  
1134  
1135  
1136  
1137  
1138  
1139  
1140  
1141  
1142  
1143  
1144  
1145  
1146  
1147  
1148  
1149  
1150  
1151  
1152  
1153  
1154  
1155  
1156  
1157  
1158  
1159  
1160  
1161  
1162  
1163  
1164  
1165  
1166  
1167  
1168  
1169  
1170  
1171  
1172  
1173  
1174  
1175  
1176  
1177  
1178  
1179  
1180  
1181  
1182  
1183  
1184  
1185  
1186  
1187  
1188  
1189  
1190  
1191  
1192  
1193  
1194  
1195  
1196  
1197  
1198  
1199  
1200  
1201  
1202  
1203  
1204  
1205  
1206  
1207  
1208  
1209  
1210  
1211  
1212  
1213  
1214  
1215  
1216  
1217  
1218  
1219  
1220  
1221  
1222  
1223  
1224  
1225  
1226  
1227  
1228  
1229  
1230  
1231  
1232  
1233  
1234  
1235  
1236  
1237  
1238  
1239  
1240  
1241  
1242  
1243  
1244  
1245  
1246  
1247  
1248  
1249  
1250  
1251  
1252  
1253  
1254  
1255  
1256  
1257  
1258  
1259  
1260  
1261  
1262  
1263  
1264  
1265  
1266  
1267  
1268  
1269  
1270  
1271  
1272  
1273  
1274  
1275  
1276  
1277  
1278  
1279  
1280  
1281  
1282  
1283  
1284  
1285  
1286  
1287  
1288  
1289  
1290  
1291  
1292  
1293  
1294  
1295  
1296  
1297  
1298  
1299  
1300  
1301  
1302  
1303  
1304  
1305  
1306  
1307  
1308  
1309  
1310  
1311  
1312  
1313  
1314  
1315  
1316  
1317  
1318  
1319  
1320  
1321  
1322  
1323  
1324  
1325  
1326  
1327  
1328  
1329  
1330  
1331  
1332  
1333  
1334  
1335  
1336  
1337  
1338  
1339  
1340  
1341  
1342  
1343  
1344  
1345  
1346  
1347  
1348  
1349  
1350  
1351  
1352  
1353  
1354  
1355  
1356  
1357  
1358  
1359  
1360  
1361  
1362  
1363  
1364  
1365  
1366  
1367  
1368  
1369  
1370  
1371  
1372  
1373  
1374  
1375  
1376  
1377  
1378  
1379  
1380  
1381  
1382  
1383  
1384  
1385  
1386  
1387  
1388  
1389  
1390  
1391  
1392  
1393  
1394  
1395  
1396  
1397  
1398  
1399  
1400  
1401  
1402  
1403  
1404  
1405  
1406  
1407  
1408  
1409  
1410  
1411  
1412  
1413  
1414  
1415  
1416  
1417  
1418  
1419  
1420  
1421  
1422  
1423  
1424  
1425  
1426  
1427  
1428  
1429  
1430  
1431  
1432  
1433  
1434  
1435  
1436  
1437  
1438  
1439  
1440  
1441  
1442  
1443  
1444  
1445  
1446  
1447  
1448  
1449  
1450  
1451  
1452  
1453  
1454  
1455  
1456  
1457  
1458  
1459  
1460  
1461  
1462  
1463  
1464  
1465  
1466  
1467  
1468  
1469  
1470  
1471  
1472  
1473  
1474  
1475  
1476  
1477  
1478  
1479  
1480  
1481  
1482  
1483  
1484  
1485  
1486  
1487  
1488  
1489  
1490  
1491  
1492  
1493  
1494  
1495  
1496  
1497  
1498  
1499  
1500  
1501  
1502  
1503  
1504  
1505  
1506  
1507  
1508  
1509  
1510  
1511  
1512  
1513  
1514  
1515  
1516  
1517  
1518  
1519  
1520  
1521  
1522  
1523  
1524  
1525  
1526  
1527  
1528  
1529  
1530  
1531  
1532  
1533  
1534  
1535  
1536  
1537  
1538  
1539  
1540  
1541  
1542  
1543  
1544  
1545  
1546  
1547  
1548  
1549  
1550  
1551  
1552  
1553  
1554  
1555  
1556  
1557  
1558  
1559  
1560  
1561  
1562  
1563  
1564  
1565  
1566  
1567  
1568  
1569  
1570  
1571  
1572  
1573  
1574  
1575  
1576  
1577  
1578  
1579  
1580  
1581  
1582  
1583  
1584  
1585  
1586  
1587  
1588  
1589  
1590  
1591  
1592  
1593  
1594  
1595  
1596  
1597  
1598  
1599  
1600  
1601  
1602  
1603  
1604  
1605  
1606  
1607  
1608  
1609  
1610  
1611  
1612  
1613  
1614  
1615  
1616  
1617  
1618  
1619  
1620  
1621  
1622  
1623  
1624  
1625  
1626  
1627  
1628  
1629  
1630  
1631  
1632  
1633  
1634  
1635  
1636  
1637  
1638  
1639  
1640  
1641  
1642  
1643  
1644  
1645  
1646  
1647  
1648  
1649  
1650  
1651  
1652  
1653  
1654  
1655  
1656  
1657  
1658  
1659  
1660  
1661  
1662  
1663  
1664  
1665  
1666  
1667  
1668  
1669  
1670  
1671  
1672  
1673  
1674  
1675  
1676  
1677  
1678  
1679  
1680  
1681  
1682  
1683  
1684  
1685  
1686  
1687  
1688  
1689  
1690  
1691  
1692  
1693  
1694  
1695  
1696  
1697  
1698  
1699  
1700  
1701  
1702  
1703  
1704  
1705  
1706  
1707  
1708  
1709  
1710  
1711  
1712  
1713  
1714  
1715  
1716  
1717  
1718  
1719  
1720  
1721  
1722  
1723  
1724  
1725  
1726  
1727  
1728  
1729  
1730  
1731  
1732  
1733  
1734  
1735  
1736  
1737  
1738  
1739  
1740  
1741  
1742  
1743  
1744  
1745  
1746  
1747  
1748  
1749  
1750  
1751  
1752  
1753  
1754  
1755  
1756  
1757  
1758  
1759  
1760  
1761  
1762  
1763  
1764  
1765  
1766  
1767  
1768  
1769  
1770  
1771  
1772  
1773  
1774  
1775  
1776  
1777  
1778  
1779  
1780  
1781  
1782  
1783  
1784  
1785  
1786  
1787  
1788  
1789  
1790  
1791  
1792  
1793  
1794  
1795  
1796  
1797  
1798  
1799  
1800  
1801  
1802  
1803  
1804  
1805  
1806  
1807  
1808  
1809  
1810  
1811  
1812  
1813  
1814  
1815  
1816  
1817  
1818  
1819  
1820  
1821  
1822  
1823  
1824  
1825  
1826  
1827  
1828  
1829  
1830  
1831  
1832  
1833  
1834  
1835  
1836  
1837  
1838  
1839  
1840  
1841  
1842  
1843  
1844  
1845  
1846  
1847  
1848  
1849  
1850  
1851  
1852  
1853  
1854  
1855  
1856  
1857  
1858  
1859  
1860  
1861  
1862  
1863  
1864  
1865  
1866  
1867  
1868  
1869  
1870  
1871  
1872  
1873  
1874  
1875  
1876  
1877  
1878  
1879  
1880  
1881  
1882  
1883  
1884  
1885  
1886  
1887  
1888  
1889  
1890  
1891  
1892  
1893  
1894  
1895  
1896  
1897  
1898  
1899  
1900  
1901  
1902  
1903  
1904  
1905  
1906  
1907  
1908  
1909  
1910  
1911  
1912  
1913  
1914  
1915  
1916  
1917  
1918  
1919  
1920  
1921  
1922  
1923  
1924  
1925  
1926  
1927  
1928  
1929  
1930  
1931  
1932  
1933  
1934  
1935  
1936  
1937  
1938  
1939  
1940  
1941  
1942  
1943  
1944  
1945  
1946  
1947  
1948  
1949  
1950  
1951  
1952  
1953  
1954  
1955  
1956  
1957  
1958  
1959  
1960  
1961  
1962  
1963  
1964  
1965  
1966  
1967  
1968  
1969  
1970  
1971  
1972  
1973  
1974  
1975  
1976  
1977  
1978  
1979  
1980  
1981  
1982  
1983  
1984  
1985  
1986  
1987  
1988  
1989  
1990  
1991  
1992  
1993  
1994  
1995  
1996  
1997  
1998  
1999  
2000  
2001  
2002  
2003  
2004  
2005  
2006  
2007  
2008  
2009  
2010  
2011  
2012  
2013  
2014  
2015  
2016  
2017  
2018  
2019  
2020  
2021  
2022  
2023  
2024  
2025  
2026  
2027  
2028  
2029  
2030  
2031  
2032  
2033  
2034  
2035  
2036  
2037  
2038  
2039  
2040  
2041  
2042  
2043  
2044  
2045  
2046  
2047  
2048  
2049  
2050  
2051  
2052  
2053  
2054  
2055  
2056  
2057  
2058  
2059  
2060  
2061  
2062  
2063  
2064  
2065  
2066  
2067  
2068  
2069  
2070  
2071  
2072  
2073  
2074  
2075  
2076  
2077  
2078  
2079  
2080  
2081  
2082  
2083  
2084  
2085  
2086  
2087  
2088  
2089  
2090  
2091  
2092  
2093  
2094  
2095  
2096  
2097  
2098  
2099  
2100  
2101  
2102  
2103  
2104  
2105  
2106  
2107  
2108  
2109  
2110  
2111  
2112  
2113  
2114  
2115  
2116  
2117  
2118  
2119  
2120  
2121  
2122  
2123  
2124  
2125  
2126  
2127  
2128  
2129  
2130  
2131  
2132  
2133  
2134  
2135  
2136  
2137  
2138  
2139  
2140  
2141  
2142  
2143  
2144  
2145  
2146  
2147  
2148  
2149  
2150  
2151  
2152  
2153  
2154  
2155  
2156  
2157  
2158  
2159  
2160  
2161  
2162  
2163  
2164  
2165  
2166  
2167  
2168  
2169  
2170  
2171  
2172  
2173  
2174  
2175  
2176  
2177  
2178  
2179  
2180  
2181  
2182  
2183  
2184  
2185  
2186  
2187  
2188  
2189  
2190  
2191  
2192  
2193  
2194  
2195  
2196  
2197  
2198  
2199  
2200  
2201  
2202  
2203  
2204  
2205  
2206  
2207  
2208  
2209  
2210  
2211  
2212  
2213  
2214  
2215  
2216  
2217  
2218  
2219  
2220  
2221  
2222  
2223  
2224  
2225  
2226  
2227  
2228  
2229  
2230  
2231  
2232  
2233  
2234  
2235  
2236  
2237  
2238  
2239  
224

## **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

The invention, together with further objects and advantages thereof, may best be understood by referencing the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which:

5           Figure 1 is a schematic illustration of a general purpose computer system suitable for implementing the present invention.

Figure 2 is a flow diagram of a method for generating an animatable object according to the present invention.

10           Figures 3A-3G illustrate the steps of the method according to the present invention as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 4 is an illustration of the generated animatable object after portions of it have been moved.

Figure 5 is a flow diagram of a method according to the present invention for utilizing the generated animatable object.

15

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Reference will now be made in detail to a preferred embodiment of the invention. An example of the preferred embodiment is illustrated in the accompanying drawings. While the invention will be described in conjunction with a preferred embodiment, it will be understood that it is not intended to limit the invention to one preferred embodiment. To the contrary, it is intended to cover alternatives, modifications, and equivalents as may be included within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

The present invention employs various processes involving data stored in computer systems. These processes are those requiring physical manipulation of physical quantities. Usually, though not necessarily, these quantities take the form of electrical or magnetic signals capable of being stored, transferred, combined, compared, and otherwise manipulated. It is sometimes convenient, principally for reasons of common usage, to refer to these signals as bits, values, elements, variables, characters, data structures, or the like. It should be remembered, however, that all of these and similar terms are to be associated with the appropriate physical quantities and are merely convenient labels applied to these quantities.

Figure 1 is a schematic illustration of a general purpose computer system suitable for implementing the process of the present invention. The computer system includes a central processing unit (CPU) 102, which CPU is coupled bi-directionally with random access memory (RAM) 104 and unidirectionally with read only memory (ROM) 106. Typically RAM 104 includes programming instructions and data, including text objects as described herein in addition to other data and instructions for

processes currently operating on CPU 102. ROM 106 typically includes basic operating instructions, data and objects used by the computer to perform its functions. In addition, a mass storage device 108, such as a hard disk, CD ROM, magneto-optical (floptical) drive, tape drive or the like, is coupled bi-directionally with CPU

5 102. Mass storage device 108 generally includes additional programming instructions, data and text objects that typically are not in active use by the CPU, although the address space may be accessed by the CPU, *e.g.*, for virtual memory or the like. The system is also shown to include a visual input device, such as a camera 150. Additionally, the CPU is also coupled to a display 152. Each of the above described

10 computers further includes an input/output source 110 that typically includes input media such as a keyboard, pointer devices (*e.g.*, a mouse or stylus) and the like. Each computer can also include a network connection 112 over which data, including, *e.g.*, text objects, and instructions can be transferred. Additional mass storage devices (not shown) may also be connected to CPU 102 through network connection 112. It will

15 be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the above described hardware and software elements are of standard design and construction.

Figure 2 is a flow diagram of a method for generating a character according to the present invention. A character, as herein referred to, includes any object displayable on a display, such as a computer display. Preferably, the generated

20 character is animatable. The term animatable is herein meant to include the display or presentation of a motion or a series of motions.

A topology of a skeleton is determined via step 300. A skeleton is herein referred to include any rough approximation of an object. For instance, a skeleton can



include an outline of a person, or an object such as a chair. When the user determines the topology of a skeleton, the user can roughly estimate what shape the desired character will have. For example, the user can decide to create a personal character of himself. In doing so, the user determines that the topology of the skeleton will  
5 include a head portion, a body portion, two arm portions, and two leg portions.

It is then determined where motion will occur via step 302. In the given example, the user can determine that motion will occur at the shoulders, the elbows, the wrists, the waist, the hip joints, the knees, and the ankles.

Next, the user can construct various components of the skeleton from  
10 established parts via step 304. The established parts preferably include rods and joints, wherein the rods are sections which remain rigid during motion and the joints are movable sections. Preferably, the rods maintain their geometric parameters during motion.

The skeleton is then positioned over a digital image via step 306, and the  
15 digital image is prepared via step 308. The desired object in the digital image is preferably positioned such that joint angles are as close to zero as possible. For example, if the desired object is a person, it is preferred that the digital image of the person shows the person in a stance where the arms are separated from the body, such as parallel to the floor, and the legs spread apart.

20 Preparation of the digital image can include preparation such as background subtraction and real time capture of the image. Background subtraction is described in detail in co-pending U.S. Serial No. 08/951,089 (Attorney Docket No. ELECP001),

filed October 15, 1997, assigned to the same assignee as the present invention, herein incorporated by reference. Real time capture of the image is described in detail in U.S. Provisional Serial No. 60/062,068 (Attorney Docket No. ELECP003), filed October 15, 1997, assigned to the same assignee as the present invention, also herein  
5 incorporated by reference. Alternatively, preparation of the digital image can be simplified through the use of a predefined background such as that described in detail in co-pending U.S. Serial No. 08/951,087 (Attorney Docket No. ELECP004). Although these examples of the preparation processes are described in detail in the above identified co-pending U.S. applications, these processes will briefly be  
10 summarized herein.

The main objective of the preparation of the digital image via step 308 is to obtain a clean image of the desired object located within the digital image. This objective can be accomplished in one of several ways. For example, one way is to subtract the background and identify the desired object in its entirety. Background  
15 subtraction attempts to extract the desired object from the remaining portions of the digital image. One method of identifying the desired object is to take a photo of the background, then take another photo with the desired object located in front of the background. The first photo can be compared with the second photo and the new object identified. The background can then be automatically subtracted such that an  
20 approximate image of the desired object can be derived.

For a cleaner image of the desired object, the background subtraction method can be performed in conjunction with utilizing the skeleton as parameters for determining the background versus the desired object. If a portion of the image is

within the parameters of the skeleton, then it can be considered as part of the desired object. If a portion of the image is outside the parameters of the skeleton, then it should be considered part of the background. For example, if a cat has inadvertently walked into the second photo, the cat would not be considered part of the desired object since the figure of the cat is not part of the skeleton.

Another way to subtract the background is by using a predefined background such as a box colored blue. When the desired object is placed in front of the predefined background, it is easier to determine what is the background and what is the desired object.

Yet another way to subtract the background is by manually extracting the desired object. The desired object can be manually extracted from the background by manually outlining the desired object from the background. In using the manually extraction method, the digital image is prepared prior to positioning the skeleton over the digital image. Accordingly, step 308 of Figure 2 occurs prior to step 306. Using this manual method allows the desired object to be extracted from a single digital image.

The parameters of the skeleton are then adjusted to surround the entire desired object in the digital image via step 310. Texture maps are then laminated onto the skeleton via step 312 using well-known texture mapping techniques. The appearance of the joints is likely to improve if the skeleton is adjusted tightly around the desired object. Moreover, in general, the texture maps will require less storage space if the skeleton is adjusted tightly around the desired object.

Figures 3A-3G illustrate step 300-312 of the method described in Figure 2. The topology of the skeleton is determined as shown in Figure 3A. The locations where motion will occur is then determined as shown in Figure 3B. In this example, a skeleton 400 of a person is shown in Figures 3A and 3B. Figure 3B also shows  
5 some of the locations where motion will occur at points 402A-402D.

Figure 3C shows an example of a skeleton 400'' which is constructed from established parts. These established parts include rods 404 and joints 406. When a component of the skeleton 400'' is moved, the rods 404 remain rigid while the joints 406 can flex and/or rotate. Note that the parameters and dimensions of the rods and  
10 joints can be changed, for example, elongated, shrunk, or angled. However, during motion of a particular component, the dimensions of the rods remain fixed. Joints 406 which can be used for the skeleton are described in detail in co-pending U.S. Application Serial No. 08/951,083, filed October 15, 1997, (Attorney Docket No. ELECP008) assigned to the same assignee as the present invention, as herein  
15 incorporated by reference. For ease of reference, a brief description of examples of joints which can be used on the skeleton is included herein.

Various joint designs may be used to accomplish the end result of substantial structural integrity of the rods during and immediately after movement. Two examples of joints which can be used are what is herein referred to as center pin  
20 joints, and center radial joints. Either of the exemplary joints can be made from various geometric shapes. Preferably, they are a compilation of polygons. For example, these joints can be created out of two or more rectangles, trapezoids, or triangles.

The center pin joint is a non-segmented joint. A non-segmented joint is herein meant to describe a joint which consists of approximately two polygons. The center pin joint can be imagined as taking two abutting rectangles and sticking a pin through the center of the common edge. Both halves of the joint experience no substantial distortion as the joint angle is varied. However, the center pin joint may be discontinuous in some way when one portion of the joint is being rotated. For example, when a lower arm of a character is moved, a triangular gap may appear between the upper arm and the lower arm.

The center radial joint is a segmented joint. Segmented joints have the properties that they appear to retain texture map continuity when the joint is rotated, however, the interiors of the segments will be warped in some manner. For example, when a lower arm of the character is moved, no gap will appear between the upper arm and the lower arm since the segments of the segmented joint will warp to cover that section. Segmented joints can consist of two or more geometric shapes such as polygons.

Figure 3D illustrates the skeleton 400'' being overlaid with the desired object of a prepared digital image, in this case, a person 410, to create a customized character.

Figure 3E shows the desired object, in this case a person, after the digital image has been prepared via step 308 of Figure 2. The background has been subtracted and the desired object 410 is clearly defined. As previously mentioned, details of examples of methods for the preparation of the digital image are discussed in co-pending applications which are herein incorporated by reference. As previously

Attorney Docket No. ELECP006A

PATENT

stated, a clean image of the desired object can be obtained by several ways. One method is for a person to follow the outlines of the desired object, thereby "cutting out" the desired object and "pasting" the desired object onto the skeleton. Another method is to photograph the background image without the desired object, then  
5 photograph the desired object in front of the background and perform a background subtraction based on subtracting the first image from the second image. Additionally, to obtain a cleaner image than what the background subtraction can provide, the background subtraction can be performed in conjunction with the parameters of the skeleton such that anything outside the skeleton will be subtracted as background and  
10 portions inside the skeleton can be determined as part of the desired object. This preparation method can avoid situations such as dark spots within the center of the desired object or additional objects aside from the desired object being included as part of the desired object.

Figures 3F and 3G illustrate the texture mapping step 312 of Figure 2.  
15 Texture mapping is well known in the field of art. For example, basic principles of texture mapping can be found in *Advanced Animation & Rendering Techniques*, Chapter 6, "Mapping Technique: Texture & Environmental Mapping", Alan Watt, Mark Watt, Addison Wesley (1992). Laminating the texture map onto the skeleton allows consistency in the texture of a component of the desired object when that  
20 component is moved. For example, when an arm is moved from a vertical position to a horizontal position, the stripes on the sleeve of the arm will also appear to move from the vertical position to the horizontal position. Texture mapping for purposes of the present invention can be performed in various ways, including affine mapping, perspective mapping, and bilinear mapping.

In the example shown in Figures 3F and 3G, a texture map area 454 is associated with a portion of the character as shown in Figure 3F. The portion associated with the texture map area 454 is shown as an arm 450, which also includes a portion of a sleeve with stripes on it. The pixels included in the area associated with the texture map area 454 are copied and transformed from an (x,y) coordinate associated with the pixels to a (u,v) coordinate associated with the texture map area 454. The transformed, copied pixels are typically referred to as texels.

Figure 3G shows the texture map area 454 including texels. A region 452 is associated with the texture map area 454. The texture map area 454 includes all the pixels within the area, which are typically referred to as texels. The texture map area 454 typically includes representative points, in this example, the vertices 456a-456d. Data related to these vertices 456a-456d include (x,y) coordinates related to the display and they also include (u,v) coordinates related to the texture mapping area 454. The (u,v) coordinates of the vertices 456a-456d can be derived through various methods. One method of deriving the (u,v) coordinates is described below.

The (u,v) coordinates range from 0 to 1. The u and v coordinates can be derived as ratios to the height and width of the bounding texture map area 454. For instance, if the top boundary 458 of the texture mapping area 454 is one hundred texels wide and if the vertex 456a is at the twenty-fifth texel counting from the upper left corner of the texture mapping area 454, then the vertices 456a will have a (u,v) coordinate of (0, .25). ( $25 / 100 = .25$ ) The (u,v) coordinate does not change regardless of how the character is moved within the display. Thus, the vertices 456a-456d can have their (x,y) coordinates changed without affecting their (u,v)

coordinates. When the texels are scanned, the (u,v) coordinate of the non-vertices  
texels are interpolated, such that only the (u,v) coordinates of the vertices 456a-456d  
need be stored. Additionally, only the image included in the region 452 will be  
scanned out, such that the remaining portions of the character outside the region 452,  
5 but within the texture map area 454 will not be addressed. Accordingly, the texture  
appears consistent with the rest of the shirt when a portion of the shirt is moved.

Figure 4 shows the resulting customized character with portions of the  
character having been moved. Despite the fact that the customized character is  
initially created in a static pose, it is animatable after it is created. For instance,  
10 although it is preferred that the desired object, such as a child, poses in a single pose,  
preferably arms out and legs apart, this digitized image can be animated once the  
customized character of the child is created. In Figure 4, the arms have been rotated  
upward while the legs have been rotated in a clockwise direction. Thus the  
customized character can be animated in whatever manner the user chooses.

15 Note that one of the advantages of the present invention is that a user can  
create a customized character quickly and efficiently without the need for  
programming in code and without a highly labor intensive session. The user can  
“click and drag” a portion of the customized character, such as the arm, into a new  
position. Additionally, parameters and dimensions can be changed, for instance, the  
20 length of the legs can be changed and the waist of the customized character can be  
cinched. Thus, once the customized character is created, the parameter of the  
skeleton can be changed and the desired object from the digital image changes along  
with the skeleton. The user may simply “click and drag” certain points of the



customized character such that the user can change the parameters of the torso by clicking on a point in the waste of the character dragging it closer in, thereby cinching the waste.

The customized characters can be the image of a person or an inanimate object  
5 such as a teddy bear or a chair, or an imaginary character. These customized characters can be used in various ways, for example, they can be animated, used as a personal representation of the user, or used in a computer game. Because the customized character can have many degrees of freedom allowed by a large number of parameters, almost any type of animation is possible. Once the customized  
10 character is created, it is a coherent connected geometric model in which portions of the customized character can be moved in conjunction with the rest of the rest of the customized character rather than as a compilation of independent parts. Automatic animation can also be performed via a game or animation package. For animation of expression, for example on a person's face, a continual capture of the person's face  
15 can be used to paste onto the face of the customized character.

Once created, the customized character can be stored in memory, perhaps in a file format. The customized character is a displayable primitive which can be recalled onto a display whenever the user prefers. The customized character is an editable construct wherein the form of the character can be changed to a user's preferences.  
20 For example, joint angles can be changed, motions can be made, and the customized character can be programmed to dance. Each component of the customized character, such as rods and joints, can be considered an object in an appropriate programming language, such as C++. Accordingly, commands may be sent to a body part to detach

itself from the remaining body, or a body part can be referenced by name and a command directed specifically to that particular body part.

Because the skeleton of the customized character is a coherent geometric model, either forward kinematics or inverse kinematics can be used to ensure that  
5 when a portion of the customized character is moved, other portions connected to it will behave according to a predetermined model of motion. An example of forward kinematics is when the joints of an arm of a customized character is moved, the hand attached to the arm will move accordingly. An example of inverse kinematics is when a hand is moved, the joints in the arm are consistent with the hand motion such  
10 that the rest of the arm will move appropriately to adjust to the new position of the hand. The principles and applications of inverse kinematics is well known in the field of art.

A further advantage of the method and system according to the present invention is the ability to transmit the data relating to the customized character over a  
15 network, such as the Internet. Once the data related to the generation of the customized character has been transmitted, it is not necessary to continually retransmit the generation data. Rather, the data related to the generation of the customized character need only be transmitted and properly received once. To create animation, once the receiver has received the data regarding the generation of the  
20 customized character, only data related to the animation would need to be sent. For example, once the customized character has been received by the receiver, the sender would merely need to send information such as joint angles, position of body, possible rotation of body, changes in length, and possibly changes in width.

Accordingly, only changes to the customized character would need to be sent rather than re-sending the customized character in various animated forms such as would be necessary in a continuous stream of video.

Sending a continuous stream of video would be highly inefficient and costly.

5 In contrast, according to the method and system of the present invention, after the initial cost of sending data related to the creation of the customized character, the customized character would not need to be recreated in a different stance, rather only the changes to the customized character would need to be sent. Merely sending the changes would normally constitute such a small amount of data that two players on a  
10 network such as the Internet could play a game together in appropriate real time with customized characters representing themselves with each game player sending data regarding the changes to their own customized character to the other computer on the Internet.

Figure 5 shows a basic flow diagram of a method according to the present  
15 invention for animating a customized character in a computer network system. Data related to the generation of a customized character is transmitted over a network via step 600, wherein the data related to the generation of the personal character no longer needed to be transmitted once the object is generated. Thus, unlike a stream of video, or an image which needs to be refreshed regularly, once the data regarding the  
20 generation of the customized character is received, no further data related to the generation of the same customized character is required. Then, data related to an animation, or a change in any portion of the customized character is transmitted via

step 602. Accordingly, only the changes, such as changes in a particular joint angle, need to be transmitted through the network from that time forward.

A method and system for generating an animatable character has been disclosed. Software written according to the present invention is to be stored in some  
5 form of computer-readable medium, such as memory or CD-ROM, or transmitted over a network, and executed by a processor.

While this invention has been described in terms of preferred embodiments, it is contemplated that alternations, modifications, and permutations thereof will become apparent to those skilled in the art upon the reading of the specification and  
10 study of the drawing. Furthermore, certain terminology has been used for the purposes of descriptive clarity, and not to limit the present invention. It is therefore intended that the following appended claims include all such alternations, modification, and permutations as fall within the true spirit and scope of the present invention.